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# The BOOK NEWS MONTHLY

## "Ik Marvel"

ILLUSTRATED

By James Melvin Lee

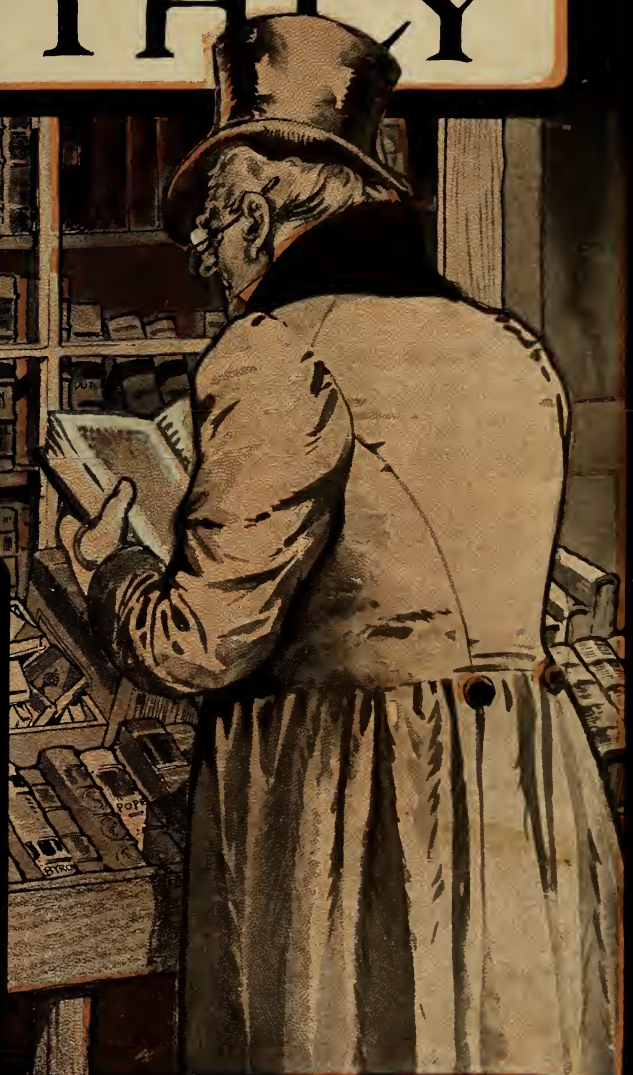
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### Lincoln

The Man of Letters

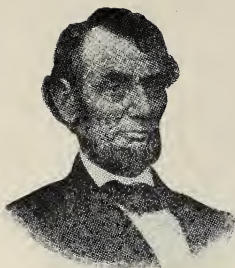
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Executive Mansion  
Washington, Nov 21. 1864

To Mrs Bixby, Boston, Mass,

Dear Madam.

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

Facsimile of Lincoln Letter  
Now hanging in Brasenose College, Oxford



# Abraham Lincoln—Man of Letters

*An Aspect of Lincoln Not Often Contemplated*

*By William Francis O'Donnell*

**T**OWERING genius," Abraham Lincoln once said, "disdains a beaten path." That the aphorism is true his own life has abundantly shown. He proved it as statesman, reformer, humanitarian, but also in another way that has never been sufficiently noted—as a man of letters. The unbeaten way he trod to the heights of language threaded no labyrinth of books, but the forest of unwritten lore, whose treasures are unveiled only to the sense of the overman.

In an age of advanced learning, culture and imitation, he remained as much an individualist as Moses had been in the first faint dawn of society. His voice was Nature's own—

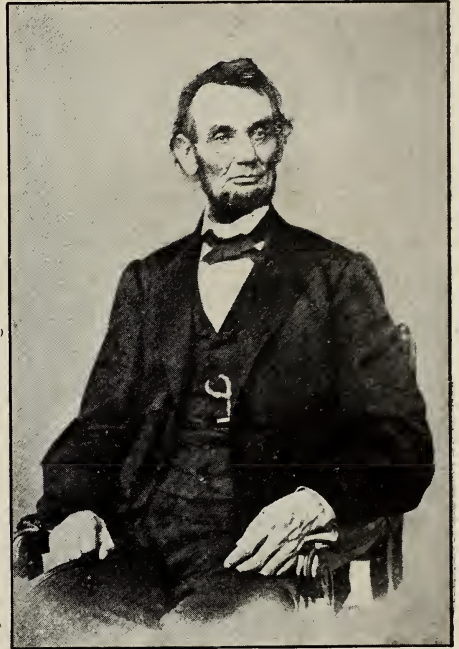
The color of the ground was in him, the red earth,  
The tang and odor of the primal things.

To deny him a place in letters simply because he left few written works, would be to scout the just fame of Socrates and Aristotle, of Burke, and Pitt, and Clay. Two of those names would have to be combined to fill the measure of a Lincoln—say, Pitt and Socrates. To write Lincoln down a man of letters is no more rash than to say that his many public utterances constitute the purest, sublimest diction that has come out of America; that they throb with a vigor titanic, a pathos heart-deep, a logic superhuman; that in epigrammatic sparkle, homely illustration, and judicious tintings of humor they are unexampled. Some discriminating thinkers have gone so far as to call him the well-spring and greatest exponent of the American school of humor.

Yet as grave an injustice as can be done the memory of Lincoln is to think of him as a mere humorist. Every humorous or witty word he ever spoke might better be spared than a single line from one of those masterly messages in which he played upon the nethermost strings of the human heart—those evidences of his all-embracing humanity. Helpfulness—this is the touchstone to apply in determining his

place in posterity. His humor has helped; his humanity has done more: it has saved.

On one of the walls of Brasenose College, Oxford University, England, hangs an engrossed copy of a letter written to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, of Boston, condoling



**Abraham Lincoln**

*After a favorite photograph, taken in 1864*

with her on the loss of five sons in the Civil War (a loss afterward mitigated by the unexpected return of three of the boys). The Oxford professors placed it there as a model of the purest and most exquisite diction in the English language. It was written by a chief executive of the United States who had gone to school but six months in his life. It is the heart in it that makes it sublime.

Another time—before fame had shone upon him—Lincoln was signally noticed by an American college. He had debated with Douglas across the State of Illinois, but had been defeated for the Senate, and was now (1859) talked of as Vice-Presi-

dential timber; and when invited to lecture in the East he felt honored and had no idea of setting any Eastern rivers afire. Puzzled, and mildly pleased, with the Cooper Union ovation, he went on to Connecticut only to encounter more amazing honors—for the Yale professors openly paid homage to him! One of them followed him from New Haven to Meriden, drank in every word, noted every gesture, every pause, every shade of inflection—and made his mastery of language the subject of lectures to the rhetoric classes. Wherein lay the secret wondered thousands who found the charm of Lincoln's speeches as irresistible as indefinable. One admirer, the Rev. J. P. Gulliver, asked Lincoln for an explanation, and received this reply, which should be displayed in letters of gold in every school in the land:

When a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. . . . I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk of an evening with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I

was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck to me; for I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it north, and bounded it south, and bounded it east, and bounded it west.

And what writer might not take a lesson from that other episode that Lincoln once told of—how he learned to define the word *demonstrate*? The story is given in Carpenter's *Six Months in the White House*, although there are reasons for questioning its complete accuracy. That stubborn word he often came across in reading law, and the oftener he saw it, the less sure was he that he knew what it meant. "At last [these are the words attributed to him] I said, 'Lincoln, you can never make a lawyer if you do not understand what *demonstrate* means'; and I left my situation in Springfield, went to my father's house and stayed there until I could give any proposition in the six books of Euclid at sight. Then I found out what *demonstrate* means, and went back to my law studies."

And again, during those rough months when he was "traveling on the circuit,"



Lincoln's First Home in Illinois  
From *The Story-Life of Lincoln* (Winston)



Euclid was his constant companion; night after night, in stuffy little bedrooms of dingy little hotels, knees kinked up and back braced against pillows (often the bed was so small that his great feet dangled over the footboard), he worked by a tallow candle until early morning at those problems.

One finds the Euclid influence all through his works. It was this mathematical weighing of values—not a word more or less than was required to convey the precise meaning—that made his Gettysburg address perhaps the finest example of public speaking in all history. Euclid—and, one may add, Christ; for Lincoln studied the New Testament constantly, and considered the Sermon on the Mount the finest bit of literature extant. So he molded his style of speaking: not a word for flowery effect, but every one consecrated to the high purpose of bearing a message; every statement backed by weight of authority; and always that majestic reserve which stamps the superman—no listener felt that he had imparted more than a fraction, though perfect in itself, from the golden store of his mentality. So Everett, the chief orator at the Gettysburg Cemetery dedication, could not help writing him: "I should be proud if I had come so near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

And this word mastery on the part of a man who had never read a novel in his life; who had tried to read *Ivanhoe* and had failed to become interested!

There is a story that when a mere boy Lincoln tried to write a novel, but after months of thought and effort gave it up, concluding that it "wasn't much of a story anyway," and that he was not intended for fiction. It would seem that to one of his vigorous style of thinking poetry might also be unsuited, but such was not the case. Every one knows how he discovered Knox's "O, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?" and Holmes' "The Last Leaf"; how he surprised Willis upon their first meeting by repeating several passages from "Parrhasius"; and how, with Jack Kelso, the village loafer of New Salem, he used to lie in the shade of trees through the long Sundays, or on other days stand for hours idly poisoning a fishing-rod, listening to the snatches from Shakespeare

and Burns that poor Kelso had read somewhere and committed to memory. But of greater significance as denoting his literary tastes were the verses he wrote himself. His schoolboy doggerel was the delight of the country round, and, as he grew older, his clever satires on various persons who had offended him always effected a revenge the like of which the home folks had never witnessed. And he could touch the tender, graceful chords too, as these lines from a poem written about his old home indicate:

Ah! Memory! thou midway world  
"Twixt earth and Paradise,  
Where things decayed and loved ones lost  
In dreamy shadows rise,

And freed from all that's earthly, vile,  
Seem hallowed, pure and bright,  
Like scenes in some enchanted isle,  
All bathed in liquid light.

Then there is a story that he wrote some sonnets of unusual merit while practicing law in Springfield, and one of his office associates found them in his desk and invited himself to read them. Lincoln, so the story has it, entered, snatched the sheets from the other's hands, indignantly protesting that they were meant for no eye but his own, and stuffed them into his desk—and what became of them afterward no one knows. Poor bits of fugitive verse! Whatever their crudities, if any they had, how we should prize them now!

Again, it is difficult to understand antipathy for the novel on the part of a man who could write such a majestic bit of description as this, which was included in Lincoln's lecture on Niagara Falls:

It calls up the indefinite past. When Columbus first sought this continent,—when Christ suffered on the cross—when Moses led Israel through the Red Sea—nay, even when Adam first came from the hand of his Maker; then, as now, Niagara was roaring here. The eyes of that species of extinct giants whose bones fill the mounds of America have gazed on Niagara, as ours do now. Contemporary with the first race of men, and older than the first man, Niagara is strong and fresh to-day as ten thousand years ago. The Mammoth and Mastodon, so long dead that fragments of their monstrous bones alone testify that they ever lived, have gazed on Niagara—in that long, long time never still for a single moment (never dried), never froze, never slept, never rested.

That Lincoln could state a proposition more clearly than any man of his time has been asserted by competent judges;

and yet he liked to believe and have others believe that his language was just that of "the plain people of the country." And so it was, in the same sense that Whitman's was—the best that the plain people possess, as their virility, frankness, unostentation, and with such fungus growths as slang and flamboyancy eliminated.

An inelegant phrase, if forcible, was not despised by him. There was, for instance, his use of the expression "rebellion thus *sugar-coated*" in a special message to Congress in 1861. The Government printer, Mr. Defrees, protested that it was undignified, utterly out of place in a document destined to go down into history. Other advisers held the same view. But Lincoln decided:

"That word expresses precisely my idea, and I am not going to change it. The time will never come in this country when people won't know exactly what *sugar-coated* means."

Yet his neglect to make use of the more pretentious implements of language did not prevent the London "Times" from pronouncing his second inaugural address the finest State paper of the century, nor did it deter the leading educators of France from recommending his writings and speeches as perfect models of diplomatic literature—this during his lifetime, too.

Mention has been made of the Christ influence upon Lincoln. Striking confirmation of this is found in the story told in homely fashion by Lincoln's relative, Dennis Hanks.

"Abe," says I, 'where did you get so blamed many lies?' An' he says, 'Denny, when a story learns you a good lesson, it ain't no lie. God tells truth in parables. They're easier for common folks to understand and recollect.'"

Lincoln's words of wisdom alone, presented in the form of parables and epigrams, make a book to be compared only with Emerson's writings, which they excel in simplicity and what may be called their impersonal quality.

As a tousled, awkward child listening to Bible stories and *The Pilgrim's Progress* at the knee of his backwoods mother (who, despite her own disadvantages, exhorted her boy to "I'arn all you kin; be some account"), Lincoln had grasped the force of the parable as a mode of expression, and in later life became a master of it. Æsop's fables helped to the same end. For much of his humor and imagination he was no doubt indebted to *Arabian Nights*. Earnestness and purity in his writings, as in his life generally, are traceable to Weems' *Life of Washington*. Simplicity and clearness were largely imbibed from Blackstone—that Blackstone he providentially found in a barrel of trash. Shakespeare, coming after these others, gave roundness and luster to Lincoln's "book-learning."

Few were his printed sources of knowledge, but with masterful discrimination he made each serve as a tool to open up some golden mine. No amount of reading could have gained for him what was secured by his immense power of concentration and his constant burning

to do his deed

With the fine stroke and gesture of a king.

A meager half-century has not adequately fixed Lincoln's place in the world of letters. Only those ages yet unborn may assess in full measure the loss sustained when he went down

As when a kingly cedar, green with boughs,  
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,  
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

